
Book Review

FRANK, RÜDIGER, ed. *Exploring North Korean Arts*. Verlag für moderne Kunst 2011, 304 pp., \$65.00 paperback.

Reviewed by Alzo David-West

Inquiries into North Korean art typically lie outside the province of aestheticians, and works on the subject tend to approach it with a strong predilection for problems of ideology, politics, and propaganda. Serious aesthetic questions of axiology, experience, qualities, and sensations, for instance, are rarely addressed. If they are, the treatment is cursory and subsumed within the social, political, and historical discourses. Why this is so should surprise no one. North Korea is a national-Stalinist police state, and art and art-making in the country are “mass” institutions overseen by the official party-cultural organs. A preponderance of politics thus inclines sociopolitically oriented approaches.

Rüdiger Frank’s edited *Exploring North Korean Arts* lies within these familiar parameters. A political economist, he collects eleven papers from a 2010 symposium he organized for the MAK Vienna exhibition *Flowers for Kim Il Sung*. The contributors represent a range of academic disciplines, from art history to literature and music to sociology. Methodologically, the writing is alternately descriptive, expository, historical, impressionistic, interpretive, normative, and recollective, treating topics such as art marketing, the artist, poster slogans, classical literature, arts in general, collecting art, ink painting, musical instruments, postage stamps, mosaic murals, and picture books.

Somewhat surprisingly, Frank announces in his introduction that this collection is “the first of its kind” (10), when Jane Portal and Beth McKillop’s edited *North Korean Culture and Society* (2004) and Portal’s *Art under Control in North Korea* (2005) appeared earlier. Moreover, despite the arts theme, Frank emphasizes that the volume is actually “*about North Korea*” (10; italics in original). He posits a categorical “mirror” theory, which maintains that the arts reflect and shape the system and that the “arts are always political” (11). In this case, the system is a dictatorship; it is a totalitarian state with a monolithic nature; and its ideology is *Juche* (literally, subject), a non-

Marxist, socialist-ultranationalist doctrine that dominates everything.¹ Frank, in addition, frames the papers under the rubrics of impartiality and the social sciences.

The content of the book does not, however, support the social-science framework. For example, Aiden Foster-Carter and Kate Hext dub North Korean art totalitarian state-kitsch and advocate “savage parodies” of it (50). Similarly, Brian R. Myers declares that North Korean art is “revolting” ultranationalist propaganda, deserving of “critical moral judgment” (71). Arbitrary genital associations also belie the claim to social science: Foster-Carter and Hext refer to a column as a phallus, and Frank Hoffmann sees the late Kim Il Sung, two children, and a crowd in a painting as a phallus, testes, and an orgasm, respectively. Another problem is inaccuracy regarding political facts. Koen De Ceuster states that, outside official projects, the North Korean artist is “entirely free to paint whatever he or she feels like painting” (69).² Dafna Zur also remarks that Korean War-themed illustrations of stoic North Koreans, facing U.S.-South Korean torture and execution, are proximate to Japanese fascism.³

Arguably, a better framework is the cultural humanities. Complications with the cultural art object remain, nevertheless. Case in point, Foster-Carter and Hext, De Ceuster, Portal, and Hoffmann all use “fine art” and “fine arts” for North Korean art. De Ceuster even says this “art is all about beauty” (56). On one common understanding, fine art is beautiful, free, self-sufficient, and an end in itself.⁴ But that contradicts the said authors’ own definitions of North Korean art as non-individualist applied art that functions for the strict purpose of propaganda; non-artist-centered art produced in a bureaucratic, pre-modernist art world with a party line and rewards for conformity; art made by artists under stringent control; and a national form of Zhdanovist-socialist realist art that strongly discourages personal styles.

Other analytical and terminological solecisms appear, but *Exploring North Korean Arts* is a generally useful collection to motivate further research on this significant topic.⁵ The absence of chapter numbers, the apparently random organization of papers, and the lack of an index are inconvenient, though. That said, anyone new to the subject should begin with the recollections of James E. Hoare (113–131) and Portal (132–144), who made guided visits and official stays in and outside Pyongyang in 1998, 2001, and 2002.⁶ More serious scholars and students will want to read Hoffmann on painting (145–180), Marsha Haufler on mosaics (241–275), and, cautiously, De Ceuster on the artist (51–71), in that recommended order. Despite inattention to aesthetics,

¹ Classification of North Korea today as totalitarian is not unanimous. Other social scientists describe the country as eroding totalitarian (Andrew Scobell), fading totalitarian (Benjamin K. Silberstein), and post-totalitarian (Patrick McEachern).

² North Korean artists *do not* have the political freedom to paint whatever they feel like painting. If they make art “entirely free” of the ruling conventions and standards of the authoritarian party-state, artists run the risk of arrest, censure, and punishment as decadents, pornographers, psychotics, and reactionaries.

³ Stoicism is a major character trait of the Stalinist-Zhdanovist positive hero, which North Korea (constructed under Soviet Army occupation during the height of Zhdanovism) assimilated into its national art and literature. See, for example, the 1953 novelette Se Bong Chun, *The People of the Fighting Village* (Pyongyang: Ministry of Culture and Propaganda, 1955); and *Men of the Stalin Breed: True Stories of the Soviet Youth in the Great Patriotic War* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1945).

⁴ The fine artist is loyal first of all to free creativity of the spirit, or creative intuition. The subservient artist in North Korea is loyal first of all to the party and the leader. Kim Jong Il repeatedly asserts the latter point in *Art Treatise* (Misullon, 1991), officially (mis)translated as *On Fine Art: October 16, 1991* ([Pyongyang]: [Foreign Languages Publishing House], n.d.), 10, 19, 20, 40, 163, 170, *Naenara* [My Country], <http://www.naenara.com.kp/en/great/leader.php?2+3+4> (accessed October 11, 2013).

⁵ Adoption of North Korean ideological rhetoric (e.g., *revolutionary art* and *revolutionary state*) and looseness of political terms (e.g., *socialism* instead of *state-socialism*) are further problems. There are also translation errors, such as “unique ideology” instead of “monolithic/unitary ideology” (*yuil sasang*).

⁶ North Korea in this period had recently experienced the great famine of 1996 to 1999 and was struggling to overcome its economic crisis after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Soviet Union, and COMECON in 1989 to 1991. North Korea was not a COMECON member, but traded with member states.

these three papers are the most important in the book, providing as they do the requisite historical, ideological, and political contexts for understanding art and art-making in North Korea.

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